

consideration the bill (H.R. 3080) to provide for improvements to the rivers and harbors of the United States, to provide for the conservation and development of water and related resources, and for other purposes:

Ms. EDDIE BERNICE JOHNSON of Texas. Mr. Chair, I rise in support of H.R. 3080, the Water Resources Reform and Development Act (WRRDA) of 2013. As the Senior Texan on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and cosponsor of this legislation, I am glad to once again be addressing water resources legislation on the House Floor. Such legislation has not been passed by this esteemed Body since 2007, when I served as Chairwoman of the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee that helped craft and usher the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2007 into law over a presidential veto. With this background, I understand the challenge of composing and advancing such legislation to this point. I applaud the leadership demonstrated by the Chairman and Ranking Members of both the Full Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee for bringing this bill to the Floor today.

While I ultimately support the passage of this legislation, I am concerned about the weakening of environmental protections and the ability of the public to participate in that process as a result of the streamlining provisions of this bill. The Army Corps of Engineers project construction backlog and astronomical figure it carries demonstrates that project efficiency must be improved. I understand the desire to expedite Army Corps of Engineers study and project completions, yet do not believe that the environmental safeguards such as the National Environmental Policy Act are the cause of those delays. If properly funded, necessary projects can be completed with appropriate environmental considerations. I am discouraged that environmental protections are being weakened under this guise.

As Co-Chair of the Texas Maritime Caucus, I have supported language in this bill to increase commercial navigation capabilities for Texas' ports and waterways. I am excited about Texas' ports and the role that they play in cultivating the Texas economy, the National economy, and the global economy. With expansive coastlines, established intermodal infrastructure, and strategically beneficial location, maritime commerce has a bright future in Texas. Moreover, the American economy has a brighter future because of Texas' transportation investments and capabilities.

I am glad to have worked in a bipartisan fashion to include language in this legislation for an assessment of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. This assessment will be a valuable tool for the State of Texas to determine its current and future operation and maintenance needs for navigation improvements to the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, allowing it to be utilized more efficiently and productively in maritime commerce.

Further, I supported the inclusion of projects at the Sabine-Neches Waterway, Texas and at Freeport Harbor, Texas—both of which are authorized in this legislation. The Sabine-Neches Waterway project will contribute to the economic effectiveness of commercial navigation in a system of navigation channels in the Sabine-Neches estuary of Texas and Louisiana. The Freeport Harbor project provides

for a deep-draft waterway from the Gulf of Mexico to the City of Freeport through the original mouth of the Brazos River. It will contribute to the economic efficiency of commercial navigation in the region and will significantly improve Freeport Harbor's ability to compete in international maritime commerce.

These projects will help bring nearly a billion dollars of Federal funds to Texas' ports and waterways. In turn, these improvements will be a boon for Texas' economy and the National economy. Further, with the expansion of the Panama Canal, these improvements will allow Texas' ports to play an increased role in the global economy. The increased economic benefit and movement of goods will be felt throughout Texas, including in my home district in Dallas, home to two Class One rail lines, an intermodal facility, numerous interstate highways, and a strong consumer marketplace.

It is my hope that the passage of this legislation will revive the biannual WRDA authorization schedule. Monitoring the streamlining provisions of this bill, as well as assessing the expenditures of the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund will be ripe for reconsideration during the next Congress—as will many other issues. It is my belief that the overall objectives and purposes of water resources legislation are vital to America and should be considered on a biannual basis. The importance of this bill should not be lost in politics.

In closing, I want to once again thank the Chairman and Ranking Members of both the Full Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee for their leadership in advancing this legislation to the floor today.

VULNERABLE VETERANS HOUSING REFORM ACT OF 2013

SPEECH OF

HON. DEREK KILMER

OF WASHINGTON

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, October 28, 2013

Mr. KILMER. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 1742, the Vulnerable Veterans Housing Reform Act of 2013.

Our country enjoys unparalleled freedom because of the commitment and sacrifice of our troops. I believe that if you serve our country, we should have your back. That means ensuring that military families and veterans have access to the full level of benefits they have earned.

Mr. Speaker, it is unacceptable that the aid and assistance we provide to our heroes and their families, would end up diminishing housing benefits. Treating this allocation as part of the income calculation to determine HUD benefits could lead to an increase in homelessness. Why force our heroes to choose between the care they require and the shelter they need?

H.R. 1742 clarifies that the benefits earned by our military retirees shall remain used to the purposes provided—and that assistance for caring for the disabled shall not jeopardize the ability to get the housing and shelter they require.

Again I am proud to support the Vulnerable Veterans Housing Reform Act of 2013 and urge my colleagues to do the same. Let's con-

tinue our commitment to our veterans. Let us do what we can to honor their service and sacrifices. With more and more servicemen transitioning to veteran status, it's critical that we protect the benefits they have earned in service to their country.

ESTABLISHING COMMISSION OR TASK FORCE TO EVALUATE THE BACKLOG OF DISABILITY CLAIMS

SPEECH OF

HON. LOIS FRANKEL

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, October 28, 2013

Ms. FRANKEL of Florida. Mr. Speaker, the veterans' disability claims backlog is simply unacceptable. American service members who risk their lives to protect our freedoms should not have to wonder if they will receive the basic benefits they deserve. Today, more than 405,000 veterans are waiting for their benefits in this tragically backlogged system. These aren't just numbers. These are real people—heroes who served our country.

Take for example Jeff Colaicovo, a veteran living in my district in South Florida. Jeff received two Purple Hearts for his courageous service during the Vietnam War. He sacrificed for his country, and unbelievably, our claims system failed him.

Until his case was brought to my office's attention earlier this year, Jeff had made little progress towards receiving the benefits he has earned. In fact, he and his wife spent over two years struggling with bills that his benefits should have helped cover. Finally, after reaching out to my office, Jeff began receiving his far-overdue benefits in June. Jeff, along with all of our nation's veterans, deserves better.

Thankfully, today, we took an important step towards helping our veterans by passing H.R. 2189.

Part of the reason veterans often wait so long for their benefits decisions is that the average number of conditions afflicting our veterans has grown significantly. This was true for Jeff whose conditions include PTSD, loss of hearing, irregular heartbeat, and severe back problems. In fact, our service members currently returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan submit an average of 8.5 separate conditions, whereas WWII veterans typically submitted less than three.

Under the current system, each medical condition is individually adjudicated and the veteran only begins receiving benefits once the entire claim has been processed.

H.R. 2189 will address this issue by requiring the Veterans Administration to pay benefits as each element of a veteran's claim is reviewed, rather than when the entire package has been processed. This would allow veterans to begin receiving benefits checks much sooner.

While much more still needs to be done, this is an important step to help repair a broken system.